

Patrick McKenna

Public Hearing

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SB 292

My name is Patrick McKenna and I work for True Colors, an organization in Hartford that works to make sure all people regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity are respected and affirmed. Sadly, not a week goes by at True Colors where we do not receive calls, emails, or drop ins from youth who are either running, couch surfing or living on the street because they feel rejected, are being bullied, or fear for their own safety. The majority of these kids are only between 15 and 17 years old. One of our major concerns is the overrepresentation of gay youth amongst homeless youth. According to a growing body of research, LGBT youth make up an estimate of between 4%-10% of the general youth population, however youth identifying as either a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender make up 40% of the homeless youth population.

Some factors that can cause LGBT youth to become homeless are severe family conflict, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, substance abuse, mental health disabilities, abandonment, and rejection from parents or guardians. So although these are reasons that can affect any youth and cause them to become homeless, it's important to note that because of orientation LGBT youth are at a higher risk to be affected by these issues.

One of our major concerns is that reports indicate LGBT youth are at a greater risk of physical and sexual exploitation while living on the streets, at the hands of adults, police, and other youth. LGBT youth experience 7.4 more acts of sexual violence towards them than their heterosexual peers. Also, gay youth are more likely to be asked to exchange sex for money, food, clothes, drugs or shelter than heterosexual homeless youth. Perhaps the most terrifying statistics revolves around suicide. Reports show that 29% of heterosexual homeless youths think about attempting suicide, while 62% of LGBT homeless youths think about attempting suicide. These terrifying numbers make it clear we must get these young people off the streets and into a caring system with proper resources.

Another large problem is the youth's general fear of shelters and homes. We have heard countless tales from our kids about going into a facility and being discriminated against. Also, the kids we speak with make it clear that there is a real fear of harm when in a shelter. So many young gay kids are targeted because of their sexuality, and this does not stop at shelters and homes where gay bashing and abuse are still a legitimate threat.

There are many, somewhat simple ways that would help improve life for gay youth, and hopefully end the overrepresentation of gay homeless youth. One way we do that is by

working with care systems. We must adequately train social workers, case managers, group homes, foster parents and any other agencies that have direct contact with gay youth. Increasing their understanding of why LGBT teens become homeless, making sure they're able to use the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender in the right context, and ensuring that their personal beliefs will not affect the ethics they use on the job. It would also be immensely helpful to name a lead agency to coordinate services for homeless youth, which would drastically help increase efficiency within the system.

Another way to combat LGBT youth homelessness is to foster a culture and society of understanding and acceptance. If we could get people to be more accepting of gay youth it would make a huge impact. So much of youth homelessness in the LGBT community results from simple rejection, if we were all able to treat young sexual minorities with the dignity, respect and love we offer to heterosexuals, it could make a world of difference. Especially in families, which can be such a tremendous system of support for a young person identifying as LBGT.